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Commission on the Status of Women
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Item 3 (c)(i) and (ii) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives:

Enhanced participation of women in development: an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, the fields of education, health and work

Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels

Statement submitted by National Alliance of Women's Organisations, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

* E/CN.6/2006/1.

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Statement

NAWO, the National Alliance of Women's Organisations, is an umbrella providing representation and support for women's organisations whose headquarters are in England, and for individual supporters. NAWO seeks an end to gender inequality, and the establishment of social justice based on internationally agreed human rights instruments for all women, with a special focus on gender and Europe. NAWO works with sister organisations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in the UK Joint Committee on Women, which is the United Kingdom national co-ordination for the European Women's Lobby where it represents the concerns and needs of all UK women.

In this, the 50th meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, the theme, "Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels", needs to be addressed urgently especially in fields where women are notoriously absent or under-represented.

NAWO is particularly concerned that this is recognised and rectified in the field of trade negotiations. It is vital in all matters to do with global trade that women should participate at all levels of policy development, implementation and decision-making as experts at the highest levels on the board of governing international institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, and at factory, market and community levels.

The under-representation of women as economists or other experts on international trade regulatory bodies both within the UN and on other bodies is a reflection of continuing inequality between women and men and of women's lower status within societies globally.

In particular, there is dangerous and "systematic undervaluing and marginalisation of work in the home and community. Women, in bearing (for the most part unpaid), the main responsibility for both biological and 'social reproduction', that is activity that maintains the labour force, the family and the community, provide an input into both the private and the public sectors without which the multilateral trading system could not exist".[1] It is clear that countries would be unable to sustain any economic development without the bedrock of support that women maintain by providing this unpaid activity.

"Furthermore, women, the family and the community bear the brunt, and take up the slack, when new trade rules disrupt existing patterns and adjustment is needed. Both free market economics and trade policy analysis obscure these facts"[2]; there is a gulf between the operation of the market and the social context in which it exists. Whilst it is the case that the world is in a state of constant change which disrupts society and consequently forces a re-evaluation of social structures, we cannot loose sight of the standards of equality universally proclaimed as necessary though largely implemented only in part.

Despite efforts to ensure especially the least developed economies are afforded time to adjust to market demands and to make changes to protect food security and develop necessary infrastructures, and governments everywhere could do more to afford social protection (for example with the implementation of core labour standards), too often the global agenda has harmed and is harming local populations. In particular, there is wholly inadequate recognition of women's unequal and different life patterns which are detrimentally affected by rapid liberalisation of trade.

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[1] Gender Expert Group on Trade [GEGT] (2004) Position Paper, Women's National Commission, DTI, London, UK

[2] GEGT, as above

New industries bring different benefits and dangers and there is no overall equally good or bad outcome in different countries. It is important to note the complexity of the processes involved, but, among some of the reported outcomes, for example, of women leaving villages to work many miles away in free export areas for low wages with few women in senior or management positions, is the increased vulnerability of women evinced through:

- little possibility for the development of family lives and the sustaining of existing or forming of new families;
- exhaustion and health problems from long hours and poor working conditions;
- little possibility of reaching home regularly to support children or other village/community members in the work of food or other local production.
- sexual harassment, rape and the spread of HIV/AIDS and other venereal diseases;
- unwanted pregnancies with poor health service availability.

Trade liberalisation occurs with little in the way of assessment of the likely impact on workers or consumers and especially not of its differential impact on women and men, boys and girls. This too is in part due to the relative absence of women in decision-making who might ask the right questions as well as providing some of the solutions.

NAWO calls on the United Nations system in and through all its bodies and agencies to assist with technical expertise in ensuring disaggregated statistics are collected to enable gender impact assessment in trade liberalisation and to undertake such gender impact assessment. Information gained in this way must be made available to governments so that steps may be taken and aid provided to mitigate detrimental impacts.

NAWO further calls on governments – both from north and south – to encourage girls in formal education to pursue non-traditionally female topics (mathematics, economics for example), to train both women and men so that they understand the gendered nature of trade liberalisation (especially important for officials in regulatory bodies), to ensure equal numbers of women are educated to leadership, with the skills necessary for negotiation and conflict resolution, so that they may be elected and appointed to political and business positions of authority and power where their influence will be felt in challenging unfettered trade liberalisation.

NAWO further calls on the United Nations within its own system and on Governments - in particular, European governments - to require these public and private bodies to appoint qualified women at Board and other senior levels, using quotas or other specific incentives and sanctions, in order to achieve gender balance (40% minimum women, 40% minimum men and no more than 60% of either sex) thus increasing democratic decision-making.

Poverty and distress is too often the result of trade liberalisation and NAWO calls on States Parties, the UN and civil society to work together towards the goal of trade processes that ensure trade liberalisation affords both women and men enhanced lives, increased prosperity and greater opportunities.